Starships and Slave Ships

Black Ontology and the UFO Abduction Phenomenon

JONATHAN JACOB MOORE

> For sure—uncanny to consider those ships kin
> or kith—but we *are* out the same factory
> Douglas Kearney

Evidence suggests that the UFO/alien abduction phenomenon is exclusively experienced by white people in the United States. But while scholars have probed abductee narratives to surface political and symbolic anxieties for decades, none have thought of the phenomenon's whiteness alongside the archival absence of Black abductees.

Using abductee accounts, interdisciplinary studies of the UFO abduction phenomenon, and critiques of Black subjectivity, this article attends to the ontological anxieties that permeate UFO abduction narratives and their choreographic resonance with the psychosomatics of Black life.

This article begins by examining the exceptional narrative of Barney Hill, America's first and thus far only popular Black abductee. Then it brings into focus UFOlogy's aporetic negation of racial subjectivity and suggests that the UFO abduction phenomenon is,

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a posteriori, inaccessible to the Black nonsubject. Finally, it returns to Hill's experience and offers speculative implications of a libidinal relationship between the starship's technics and the slave ship's terror.

Captivation

Abduction was imminent. It was September 19, 1961, sixty degrees, and the sky was clear. A day before the Hills' journey, three Black first-year students had integrated Georgia Tech. Four months earlier a mob had gleefully brutalized Congress of Racial Equity activists as they arrived by bus in Montgomery. And before being taken aboard the UFO that had stalked him and his white wife, Betty, from the sky as they drove from Montreal to their home in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Barney Hill feared that he could not defend them by sheer will alone. His straight-ahead stare prevented the occupants of passing cars from noticing the sweat on his brow. He took solace in the gun hidden in his trunk.

The surprise "honeymoon" trip to Niagara Falls, nearly sixteen months after the couple's marriage, delighted Betty. The pair met in 1956 when Barney, his first wife, and two children went to Hampton Beach for vacation and boarded in the same house as Betty. They married five years later in Camden, New Jersey, six years before *Loving v. Virginia* struck down state laws that forbade interracial marriage.[1]

> *It must be a satellite*, he thought as the pancake-shaped disc seemed to follow his Chevrolet Bel Air down US Route 4 near Mt. Pemigewasset, called Indian Head by locals for its headdress profile. And as the object kept pace, Barney, a World War II veteran, surmised some covert military operation had mistakenly believed the White Mountains would be deserted. But he was uncertain. *What kind of military jet is shaped like that?*[2]

After parking and grabbing his binoculars and pistol, Barney ran into a nearby field to get a closer view of the disc. He stood less than fifty feet away from the glowing object, which was now hovering near the ground, closer than a nearby white pine, and discerned that the craft was piloted: his eyes met those of the occupant. Hysterical, he ran

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back to the car. By that time, what appeared to be very tall men were standing in the middle of the road, their craft casting a singular light on the highway. Barney was terrified. This blinding fear, a beeping noise, and a sudden daze is the last thing the couple remembers before spotting a sign indicating they were now in Ashland, New Hampshire, thirty-five miles south of where they last recalled being.[3] When the Hills arrived home in Portsmouth later than expected, they discovered that two hours had passed for which they could not account. Neither Barney nor Betty had any immediate recollection of what they would detail in the years to come when prompted to describe their troubling dreams and reflect on that night under hypnosis: tall humanoids with large eyes descended from the sky, dragged them into the woods, and took them captive.

For five consecutive days after the September 19 incident, Betty experienced a series of bizarre nightmares. She would later recall that the dreams were connected to the night at Indian Head.[4] In the following months, Barney's mental and physical health deteriorated. A skeptical man who prided himself on pragmatism, Barney was deeply disturbed by his inability to account for the two hours between Indian Head and Ashland. He developed an ulcer, and his blood pressure rose. In 1962 he developed an undiagnosed series of warts around his groin. Encouraged by his primary physician, Barney and Betty met with Boston psychiatrist Benjamin Simon, former chief of neuropsychiatry at the US Army's Mason General Hospital in December 1962. In separate sessions with Simon, the couple underwent hypnotic regression in the hopes of recalling more complete details of the episode. The Hills alleged that after they were taken aboard the ship, intelligent, methodical beings conducted physical examinations and invasive tests.[5]

While Simon was not convinced that the couple had been abducted by extraterrestrials, he did believe that *they* believed it. Simon wondered whether the couple suffered from folie à deux, or shared psychotic disorder, wherein delusions or hallucinations are transmitted from one person to another, generally between spouses or other family members or from captor to captive.[6] According to the *DSM-II*, social isolation and emotional interdependence were risk factors for the disorder, which is now classified as "induced delusional

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disorder" in the *ICD-10* (the World Health Organization's classification system) but does not appear in the *DSM-5*. Proponents of this theory take the Hills at their word about the UFO sighting but believe that Barney's recollections of abduction were delusions induced by Betty. Perhaps the pair saw something unusual, but no abduction took place. Or, influenced by Betty's retellings, Barney manufactured a corresponding narrative, creating a circular effect. But because the Hills had no prior history of mental illness and because of the *isolated nature* of the event, Simon never diagnosed them. Instead, he offered his "dream hypothesis." On sighting a UFO, Betty and Barney had become emotionally disoriented. They then had been engulfed by shock during the two hours of "missing time." End of story.[7]

Nevertheless, the couple's allegations captured the imagination of national media outlets and curious citizens when John G. Fuller published his in-depth interview of the couple in *Look* magazine. His 1966 piece, "Aboard a Flying Saucer: The Adventures of Two 'Kidnapped' Humans," is a time capsule of Cold War paranoia. Was the military conducting undisclosed drills or experimenting with new weapons? Were the Soviets using advanced technologies to spy on unsuspecting Americans?[8] Before the Fuller interview, the couple had shared their experience of extraterrestrial encounter only with select friends, relatives, and members of their Unitarian congregation. But after it was published, the Hills catapulted to national fame, theirs the first narrative of an alien abduction in the United States. Betty and Barney became the prototypical abductees or *experiencers*, two terms used to describe people who claim to have had contact with unearthly beings. And their bizarre tale of a Black postal carrier and a white social worker encountering ETs inspired multiple books, films, and TV specials and continues to receive attention in Hollywood.[9]

UFOlogy and Ontology

After Barney's death in 1969, Betty continued recounting the purported events of September 19, 1961, across the globe, delivering keynotes at conventions and conferences, collaborating with investigators, and consulting for projects that capitalized on the couple's allegations. However, despite being the first and only alien abduction

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experience of a Black American to gain prominence inside and outside the UFO community, the narrative of Barney Hill remains forgotten or neglected by lay investigators and UFOlogists. Likewise, the dissonance evident between the experiences of Barney and Betty, revealed in print and audio recordings of the hypnotic regression sessions, has been unthought until now. I wanted to contextualize Barney's narrative and account for the "ontological resistance" he lacked as a Black man, a vulnerability that preceded the arrival of space monsters.[10] To put it differently, I wanted to revisit this paranormal event with an understanding of abduction as a mundane quality, and the first condition, of Black life. In the process I became versed in UFOlogy—the interdisciplinary investigation of UFOs. Modern UFOlogy is a conglomeration of mostly nongovernmental organizations in the United States and a handful of scholars (predominantly anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and sociologists) documenting reports of UFO sightings and attempting to make meaning of UFO abductions. Using varied questions, these communities have arrived at different conclusions. New scientific explanations of the abduction phenomenon have been offered by skeptics over the years. Perhaps these people suffer from "accidental awareness," or the residual trauma of being conscious while anesthetized.[11] Maybe most recount nothing but terrifying bouts of sleep paralysis.[12] Many psychologists believe that the phenomenon is a combination of sleep paralysis and shared delusion induced by popular culture, which could even account for this first abduction: weeks before their sighting at Indian Head, the Hills had watched an episode of *The Outer Limits* that featured aliens. Meanwhile, historians of American folklore have attempted to determine the cultural function of UFO abduction narratives. Some believe that these narratives stem from America's "first coherent mythical literature"—colonial captivity narratives.[13] These stories of kidnapping, murder, and rape were circulated by colonists to justify their genocidal expansion. Michael Sturma has suggested that these Indian kidnapping narratives share a central metaphor with alien abduction stories—"crossing frontiers and the forced experience of another culture."[14] Others have attempted to identify shared perceptions and symbolic practices among abductees. In "Mythmaking in Alien Abduction Narratives,"

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Stephanie Kelly-Romano refines the critical distinction between people who have interacted with extraterrestrials (experiencers) and people who are taken against their will (abductees) by analyzing 130 UFO abduction narratives. She organizes all narratives into four categories—physical salvation, hybridization, betterment of humanity, and cosmic humanity—and argues that each one reflects the acculturation and desires of abductees.[15] As I read more and more about the abduction phenomenon, I discovered a confounding absence of Black abductees, save for Barney. If this phenomenon is, as UFO research organizations maintain, truly global and indiscriminate, I wondered, why was every abductee I encountered in the archive—anonymous and named—white? Had not anyone, anywhere asked the same question and uncovered the rhyme or reason? Soon after that, I discovered Lucas Tromly's "Race, Citizenship, and the Politics of Alien Abduction; or, Why Aliens Do Not Abduct Asian Americans." Surely this would offer a theory of the phenomenon that accounted for its homogeneity? "Alien abduction," Tromly writes, "is an inherently *American* experience."[16] He argues that the absence of Asian American abductees proves that the abductee community—"a body of people who stand to be abducted"—is structured by sameness and foreignness. "The racial blind spots of abduction discourse emerge through the difficulty with which Asian Americans, whose conflation of racial and national identities cannot easily be gathered into a fantasy of national sameness, occupy the role of abductee," Tromly writes.[17] Here a person *who stands to be abducted* is not "white" but "American." Tromly notes only one nonwhite abductee—Barney Hill—and calls the American slave narrative the phenomenon's "most important generic precursor." I went looking for Black abductees, but in every study of close encounters I found none. They did not statistically exist, or they remained unaccounted for.[18] I also learned that experiencers are prone to exaggerate the diversity of their communities. According to the website for the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), a volunteer-based US nonprofit that collects data on sightings and studies abductions worldwide, they receive between five hundred and one thousand reports of sightings every month from a diverse population. But this assertion is unsupported by data. Since the founding of the organization in 1969,

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MUFON has never documented the race of experiencers. The director of the organization's California chapter suggested that there was no reason to allow experiencers to report their race when submitting online reports.[19] While this race-blind logic helped explain the whiteness of UFO abduction Reddits and listservs, it didn't explain the absence of abductees in studies. I began to wonder: If the absence of Asian American abductees, according to Tromly, evinced their alienation from national belonging, why were Black American abductees MIA?

Eventually, I read the work of the late psychiatrist and UFOlogy vindicator Dr. John E. Mack. A Harvard University Department of Psychiatry chair and Pulitzer Prize winner, he remains the most eminent scholar to have seriously investigated questions raised by the UFO abduction phenomenon. While his research in child and adolescent psychology and addiction brought him to Harvard, he later became interested in perception and antimaterialism. And after failing, like Benjamin Simon, to pathologize patients recounting abduction experiences, and realizing that no psychogenic cause had ever been identified, Mack commenced a study of two hundred abductees for more than ten years, sixty of whom—all of them white—appear in his 1994 best seller *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*. *Abduction* encourages readers to reconsider the popular assumption that abductees are hoaxers or mentally ill. Instead, Mack takes their experiences seriously. He attends to the absence of preexisting psychological disorders among these patients and highlights their struggle to maintain a sense of well-being or social belonging after their abduction. Mack suggests that studying the phenomenon might enrich our understanding of physical reality. "There are phenomena and experiences reported by abductees," he writes, "for which we can conceive of no explanation within a Newtonian/Cartesian or even Einsteinian space/time ontology."[20] Mack describes the disorientation his patients experience after recalling their purported encounters as the *ontological shock* of abduction: "For until the powerful reliving that has occurred during the hypnosis session, the abductees may have still clung to the possibility that these experiences are dreams or some sort of curable mental disorder."[21] After hypnosis, he discovered, abductees are overwhelmed by the sudden revelation

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that "their conception of reality does not hold."[22] Troubled, Mack set out to "locate a new ontological ground"—what he imagined might be a parallel dimension or imperceptible space-time—that could account for the claims of his patients.[23]

With Black abductees still nowhere to be found in study after study, the words of Susan Lepselter sound less cryptic and more argumentative. According to Lepselter, those boarded onto alien spacecraft "are immobilized with invisible, uncanny chains; they remind us of other terrors, as they dread leaving their own world and becoming the possessions of these technologically dominating others."[24] What if the absence (or disappearance) of the Black abductee is a problem not of representation, I wondered, but of ontology?

Captivity

Let us begin with a scene of remembering. One is plucked out of bed and floated through the roof of one's home into the hull of a ship, disrobed, prodded, studied, and returned without any explanation or formal recognition. One is reminded of ships carrying antehuman cargo and experiences, ever so briefly: the natal alienation and subjection to the will of another that marked the making of Africans into Blacks and continues to order the Black quotidian. In this way, one might suggest that the abductee unwittingly conspires in the "dethroning" of the human from its "metaphysical pedestal."[25] Surely this recognition speaks to the abductee's humanity. But given that, as Saidiya V. Hartman writes in *Scenes of Subjection*, empathy with the slave "fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead," this hypothesis must be problematized.[26]

Recent scholarship in Black studies calls into question the popular assumption that Black life can *be*, unencumbered by the structural violence that initiated and conditions it. Afropessimist thinkers argue that civil society is dependent on anti-Black violence and that this violence cannot be analogized with other regimes that discipline non-Black beings. For Afropessimism, to categorize Black people as human is an epistemological mistake, one that covers a false assumption—"that all sentient beings possess the discursive capacity to transform limitless space into nameable place and endless duration into

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recognized and incorporated events."[27] Civil society's ontological guarantor is the slave, and the slave's jurisdiction is *the hold*. The hold is not a discrete place but the World. It is not a temporally bound event but the dispersed afterlives of slavery that create and condition Black life. It is the loud and breathing domain of the socially dead. As Christina Sharpe writes, Black people "inhabit and are inhabited by the hold."[28]

When I approached the alien abduction phenomenon as a constitutively white experience, the resonance between the hold and the spaceship became clearer and stronger. Suddenly Mack's theoretical, extradimensional plane appeared a novel invention. How else to shield his patients from the vicious pathology that accompanies any experience with the lacunar "energy of a black, or blackened, position [that] holds out a singularly transformative possibility" for upending human subjectivity?[29] I am suggesting here that a sentient being that is both atomically coherent and ontologically emptied already exists within our known universe. And I am proposing that alien abduction narratives cohere only because of the constitutive, psychosocial disorientation of Black nonbeing. The ontology of alien abduction begins and ends not with a person who *stands to be taken* but with a being who cannot be taken because they *are* not.

Frank B. Wilderson III refers to this sensation as objective vertigo. In *The Vengeance of Vertigo* Wilderson writes:

> Subjective vertigo is vertigo of the event. But the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment, that one's environment is perpetually unhinged stems from a relationship to violence that cannot be analogized. This is called objective vertigo, a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation. This is structural as opposed to performative violence. Black subjectivity is a crossroads where vertigoes meet, the intersection of performative and structural violence.[30]

Using Wilderson's grammar, alien abductee experiences are *subjectively vertiginous*. Whether or not the abductee describes the abduction itself as enlightening, frightening, ecstatic, confusing, sensual, or any unmentioned combination, she registers the experience as disorienting because it interrupts the generally self-regulating cognitive

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map that governs her world. And when she "makes contact" with life that is seemingly not dependent on anti-Black violence, we might call her psychic censure "ontological shock." Still, the abductee encounter is an encounter with, per Wilderson, performative violence. The unauthorized movement of the human *body* through a bedroom window might knock the furry slippers off her feet or leave her neck bruised. But this experience cannot irreparably untether her from *being*—she *will* wake come morning, in bed or perhaps in a field nearby. This anomalous experience will trouble her self-perception, and she may be shunned by others. But spaceman be damned: the abductee stands her ground. The alien abduction phenomenon is not defined by an exposure to subjective violence. What abductees share is an ontological immunity from *objective vertigo*, the structural violence that constitutes Black life before performative violence arrives on the scene in the form of badge, bad guy, or blue-skinned humanoid. To put a finer point on this proposition, let us revisit the story of Barney Hill—a story archivally mute because it illumines "the intersection of performative and structural violence." Barney's narrative of abduction and disorientation is, unlike his wife's, not contingent on spotting a UFO. Indeed, on closer reading, this abduction narrative *is* not. While no complete transcript of Barney's hypnosis has ever been released to the public, verified audio recordings of the sessions made by Simon at the request of the Hills are available on YouTube.[31] In one session Barney begins crying as he recalls approaching the hovering disc. Later, once Barney is more composed, Simon asks him to describe the faces of beings he sees through his binoculars, and he obliges: "It's round. I think of—I think of—a redhead Irishman. . . . I don't know why but . . . I think I know why. Because Irish are usually hostile to Negroes. And when I see a friendly Irish person, I react to him by thinking, 'I will be friendly.' And I think this one that is looking over his shoulder is friendly." About a minute later, after describing the "row of windows" the aliens peer through, Barney adds: "The evil face . . . on the [indecipherable]. . . . He looks like a German Nazi. He is a Nazi. . . . He had a black scarf around his neck, dangling over his left shoulder." It is not uncommon for abductees to project eugenic and physiognomic beliefs onto extraterrestrials they encounter.

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Barney initially hesitates to describe the beings as Irish but rationalizes his choice of words aloud: "Because Irish are usually hostile to Negroes." The hostile intentions of the beings watching Barney remind him of the hostility he experiences from his Irish neighbors, the first major immigrant group to settle in New Hampshire. Simon asks whether he recalls where Betty is in this moment and whether he cried out to her. "I'm not close to her," he responds. "I don't know. . . . I don't think of her." Later Barney tells Simon that he felt "like a rabbit" and provides the following explanation: "I was hunting for rabbits in Virginia. And this cute little bunny went into a bush that was not very big. . . . And the poor little bunny thought he was safe. . . . He was just hiding behind a little stalk which meant security to him, when I pounced on him, and captured the poor little bunny who thought he was safe. Funny I thought of that. Right there out in the field. I felt like a rabbit." One hundred sixty-five years before this night, a fifteen-minute walk from the Hills' Portsmouth home, Senator John Langdon saw to it that enslaved fugitive Oney Judge learned that Burwell Bassett, the nephew of George Washington, had been sent by the family to capture her and return her to Mount Vernon. Each attempt to abduct the Black woman and return her to her important owners promised to end her pursuit of freedom. When Judge died in 1848, Barney's great-grandmother, the daughter of a white plantation owner, might have been alive. She too would have been subject to what Calvin L. Warren has described as the "ontometaphysical instability" that kidnappers and their accomplices exploited for profit. Warren also reminds us that this enterprise of capture was about more than monetary reward: "Kidnapping relies on the precarious Black self—since this self exists to not exist, it is fleeting and material. Kidnapping illustrates that the free Black does not exist as human being, since the ontological presumptions of freedom are denied blacks."[32] In identifying with the "poor little bunny" he preys on, Barney meditates on the violable nature of his freedom, even more precarious than the perceived safety of the bunny hiding behind a bush too small to conceal his presence. While the rabbit's vulnerability is conditional—he could survive Barney were the bush larger or his body smaller—Barney's exposure to gratuitous violence is unconditional. His relation to being is one of captivity, and in this

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field, a metal disc hovering above, he finds himself "available in the *flesh immediate* . . . hands on."[33] As he recounts his experience, Barney becomes increasingly emotional.

> I know this creature, this leader is telling me something . . . I can see it in his face . . . his lips aren't moving . . . but he's looking at me . . . "Stay there and keep looking, just keep looking and stay there and just keep looking . . . just keep looking . . . " Oh, I gotta pull these binoculars away from my eyes! Because if I don't I'll just keep staying there! . . . "Just stay there," he's saying to me. It's pounding in my head! Pull the binoculars away! God give me strength! Pull 'em down! RUN! PULL THE BINOCULARS DOWN AND RUN! IF THERE'S A GOD GIVE ME STRENGTH![34]

At this point in the session Barney breaks out in hysterics, screaming and sobbing as he tries to catch his breath. Simon would later share that he worried Barney would jump out of the office window. And though Simon begins consoling Barney, assuring him that he cannot be harmed, Barney begs: "Those eyes: they're in my brain. Please, can I wake up?" Fanon identifies this ocular assault in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare." And when Barney wakes, he will wake again to find himself "in the world . . . an object in the midst of other objects."[35]

If, as Warren suggests, the denial of freedom to Blacks "provides the condition of possibility for kidnapping," this denial also provides the condition of *impossibility* for Barney's nonabduction. The Black abductee's "subsumption by objective vertigo . . . unique to his paradigmatic position" prevents his account from registering as a physical *or* psychogenic encounter because, as Wilderson suggests, "Black political ontology is foreclosed in the unconscious just as it is foreclosed in the court."[36] Thus Barney, the inaugural abductee, fails to *be* an abductee proper. If the alien abduction phenomenon is an experientially inaccessible domain for the Black nonsubject, then the figuration of the cosmos as a refuge for Blackness is cause for concern. And it may be that by investigating the qualities of other paranormal phenomena, we can more readily internalize the possibility that no law will endure the cosmic destruction our freedom requires.

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As I contemplate how to steady my own hands and hold closer the binoculars quivering in my own sweaty palms, what I see terrifies me. I cannot look away.

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Notes

1. Marden and Friedman, *Captured!*
2. YouTube, "Barney Hill Hypnosis—Complete."
3. Marden and Friedman, *Captured!*, 111.
4. Marden and Friedman, *Captured!*, 84.
5. Fuller, "Aboard a Flying Saucer."
6. Benjamin Simon to Philip J. Klass, March 1, 1976, Betty and Barney Hill Papers, 1961–2006, Milne Special Collections and Archives, Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire.
7. In the years after Barney's death in 1969, Simon ultimately admitted that he believed that the stress of being in an interracial marriage and Barney's "racial paranoia" had led the Hills to unconsciously materialize an unbelievable narrative, revealing only their long-standing anxieties and fears. See Simon to Klass.
8. Fuller, "Aboard a Flying Saucer."
9. Weiss, "New Docu-series."
10. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 83.
11. Forrest, "Alien Abduction," 432.
12. McNally and Clancy, "Sleep Paralysis."
13. Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, 95.
14. Sturma, "Aliens and Indians," 321.
15. Kelley-Romano, "Mythmaking in Alien Abduction Narratives," 391–402.
16. Tromly, "Race, Citizenship, and the Politics of Alien Abduction," 276. My emphasis.
17. Tromly, "Race, Citizenship, and the Politics of Alien Abduction," 277.
18. Bader, "Supernatural Support Groups."

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19. Ruben Uriarte, unpublished interview by author, October 2018.
20. Mack, *Abduction Human Encounters with Aliens*, 46.
21. Mack, *Abduction Human Encounters with Aliens*, 11.
22. Mack, *Abduction Human Encounters with Aliens*, 140.
23. Kastrup, *Meaning in Absurdity*.
24. Lepselter, *Resonance of Unseen Things*, 67.
25. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 23.
26. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 9.
27. Douglass, Terrefe, and Wilderson, "Afro-pessimism."
28. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 138.
29. Sexton, "Afro-pessimism."
30. Wilderson, "Vengeance of Vertigo."
31. See YouTube, "Barney Hill Hypnosis—Complete." All quotations of Barney's words in this paragraph are taken from this source.
32. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 107.
33. Hortense J. Spillers speaking in Arthur Jafa's film *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*.
34. YouTube, "Barney Hill Hypnosis—Complete."
35. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 87, 82.
36. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 30.

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